



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Transnational Narrativity and Pastoralism in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* by Washington Irving

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Abstract

Washington Irving's collection, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819-20), was one of the earliest and most influential texts to have achieved acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Its most famous stories, which include 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', are considered to be classics in their own right and are still popular. At the heart of the collection, however, is its narrator Geoffrey Crayon, a New Yorker travelling to England, and especially London, for the first time in order to experience its grand museums and libraries, its stunning architecture, and the sedate yet rarefied country house lifestyle of the landed gentry: in short, all of the things he could not have experienced in contemporary America. Once in England, however, Crayon is struck by his increasing feelings of exile and loneliness, and retreats into his artistic intentions as solace. Notably, the collection's most enduring stories in the collection are set in America: even as Crayon distances himself physically from his homeland he is drawn to it as an artistic subject, as though he cannot really see America until he leaves it. This feeling of artistic exile, as presented in *The Sketch Book*, is strikingly modern in tone for a text which is over 170 years old, and not only precedes later literary expatriations but anticipates developments in narrative studies, with respect to short-story theory and the composite novel.

Irving negotiates the preferences, assumptions, and historical experience of each audience by steeping his social and cultural criticism in the universal realms of storytelling and mythology. In an age of emergent cultural nationalism, Irving seeks to establish both himself and his narrator as transatlantic writers. His desire to craft a truly transatlantic work, however, becomes a blatantly pastoral act, which turns the very presence of narrative into an anachronism. In our own time of emergent cultural nationalism, recent critical revival of Irving has explored his position as a postcolonial writer, but without the fullest realisation of the narrative theories that bring to the fore precisely how Irving's work manages the diverse needs of its transatlantic audiences, or without much consideration of its fictive author. A reading of specifically transnational sketches from *The Sketch Book* from the perspective of contemporary narrative theory, but informed by their place in time, identifies and foregrounds the significance of the sociopolitical narrativity and literary pastoralism that emerges from Irving's – and Crayon's – transatlanticism.

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Washington Irving's collection, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*,¹ was one of the earliest and most influential texts to have achieved acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Its most

¹ Washington Irving. *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. 1819-20. Reprinted as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories: Or, The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (New York: Random House, 2001). All

famous stories, which include ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,’ are considered to be classics in their own right and are still popular. At the heart of the collection, however, is its narrator Geoffrey Crayon, a New Yorker travelling to England, and especially London, for the first time in order to experience its grand museums and libraries, its stunning architecture, and the sedate yet rarefied country house lifestyle of the landed gentry: in short, all of the things he could not have experienced in contemporary America. Once in England, however, Crayon is struck by his increasing feelings of exile and loneliness, and retreats into his artistic intentions as solace. Notably, the collection’s most enduring sketches and stories in the collection are set in America: even as Crayon distances himself physically from his homeland he is drawn to it as an artistic subject, as though he cannot really see America until he leaves it. This feeling of artistic exile, as presented in *The Sketch Book*, is strikingly modern in tone for a text which is over 170 years old, and not only precedes later literary expatriations but anticipates developments in narrative studies, with respect to short-story theory and the composite novel.

As Richard V. McLemore notes, Irving was in a sense ‘one of the first postcolonial writers’, and the ideas of patriotism and cultural legitimacy permeate his works in a cosmopolitan and centred way.² Much of what is truly remembered about *The Sketch Book* celebrates America’s vast wild spaces and emerging archetypes, but the pastoral, traditional, non-threatening England Irving writes about in contrast is just as foreign to his contemporary English audience, who found itself in between a political and an industrial revolution, and in a time of rapidly changing social mores, as the wild and untameable Catskills would have been to a lifetime City dweller. Irving negotiates the preferences, assumptions, and historical experience of each audience by steeping his social and cultural criticism in the universal realms of storytelling and mythology. In an age of emergent cultural nationalism, Irving seeks to establish both himself and his narrator as transatlantic writers. His desire to craft a truly transatlantic work, however, becomes a blatantly pastoral act, which turns the very presence of narrative into an anachronism. Jeffrey Insko calls attention to the need for revaluation of Irving’s place in literary history, claiming that Irving has become a ‘casualty of a particular way of thinking about history: the notion that history progresses through chronological, linear time’.³ This new emphasis on asynchronous temporality in history applies equally, if not more, to approaches to the text itself: freed from its linear publication history, *The Sketch Book* contains clues to how it should be read, as a profoundly complex statement on the transactional nature of narrative. In our own time of emergent cultural nationalism, recent critical revival of Irving has explored his position as a postcolonial writer, but without the fullest realisation of the narrative theories that bring to the fore precisely how Irving’s work manages the diverse needs of its transatlantic audiences, or without much consideration of its fictive author, Geoffrey Crayon. A reading of specifically transnational sketches from *The Sketch-Book* from the perspective of contemporary narrative theory, but informed by their place in time, identifies and foregrounds the significance of the sociopolitical narrativity and literary pastoralism that emerges from Irving’s – and Crayon’s – transatlanticism.

Although the land and its people always had stories, as a purely literary topos, the United States of America was still not fixed in Irving’s day: ‘the new United States had fewer legends to

subsequent references to *The Sketch Book* are parenthetically referenced in-text, and with shortened titles of the discussed sketch(es) as helpful, e.g. (AAH 4).

² Richard V McLemore, ‘The Dutchman in the Attic: Claiming an Inheritance in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*’, *American Literature* 72 (March 2000) 20.

³ Jeffrey Insko, ‘Diedrich Knickerbocker, Regular Bred Historian,’ *Early American Literature* 43.3 (2008) 605.

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draw upon (than did Europe), being constituted by people from a range of different national origins who were not inclined to celebrate its truly indigenous, that is Native American, traditions.⁴ Aside from what seemed to the settlers to be largely (and regrettably) irrelevant, there was yet to be a distinctly American mythology. *The Sketch Book*, perhaps inevitably, found a large readership in America, as Americans were hungry for a literature of their own, and Irving was eager to supply it. Irving himself wrote, in connection to both his literary and social ambitions, that ‘whenever I could not get a dinner to suit my taste, I would endeavour to get a taste to suit my dinner,’ but it’s clear from the wistful and tempered excellence of the sketches that *The Sketch Book* was more than a cynical cash grab.⁵ Irving felt a keen sense of what Laura J. Murray calls ‘dispossession from his English heritage,’ and he also felt sympathy for the Native Americans’ real-time loss of their land.⁶ Irving watched his own country simultaneously expand and implode from an outsider’s perspective, and this unique vantage became Irving’s creative catalyst for *The Sketch Book*.

Irving himself, in a famous 1824 letter to his friend and mentor Henry Brevoort, gives what is undoubtedly the best description of his narrative mode, but does not make a clear distinction between the sketch and the short story:

For my part I consider the story merely as a frame on which to stretch my materials. It is the play of thought, and sentiment and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half concealed vein of humour that is often playing throughout the whole ... I have preferred adopting a mode of sketches and short tales rather than long work, because ... there is a constant activity of thought and a nicety of execution required in writings of the kind, more than the world appears to imagine.⁷

While Irving does not go as far as to say so, to him, his work, while firmly rooted in the sketch genre, also represents more than the sum of its parts: the ‘play of thought, and sentiment and language’ is the very essence of story, and the combination of the sketch and the short tale is the very essence of the modern short story. Furthermore, his interest in the imagination of the reader as it pertains to the craft is of particular interest as we make the distinction between sketch and short-story.

Brander Matthews famously defined the sketch in 1901 by way of comparison: ‘while a Sketch may be still-life, in a Short-story something always happens. A Sketch may be an outline of a character, or even a picture of a mood or mind, but in a Short-story there must be something done, there must be an action’.⁸ While *The Sketch Book* is obviously a collection of disparate sketches that were originally published separately, certain thematic patterns emerge now that

⁴Allan Lloyd Smith, ‘Nineteenth-century American Literature,’ *A New Introduction to American Studies* edited by Temperely and Bigsby London: Pearson-Longman, 2006) 172.

⁵ Henry A. Pochmann, ‘Washington Irving: Amateur or Professional?’ Originally published in *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubell* edited by Clarence Gohdes. 1967. Reprinted in *A Century of Commentary on the Works of Washington Irving* edited by Andrew B. Myers (Tarrytown, NY: Sleepy Hollow Restorations, 1976) 427.

⁶ Laura J. Murray, ‘The Aesthetic of Dispossession: Washington Irving and Ideologies of (De)Colonization in the Early Republic’, *American Literary History* 8.2 (Summer 1996) 212.

⁷ Washington Irving, ‘Letter to Henry Brevoort, 1 April 1819,’ *Washington Irving: Letters*, Volume 1, 1802-23 edited by Ralph M. Aderman et al. (New York: Twayne, 1978) xxviii.

⁸ Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901) 35.

they are collected, and these patterns are best appreciated by using the tools and strategies of short-story theory, particularly the strategies of reading a short-story cycle in which there is a dominant narrative persona. In this mode, one examines, according to Robert Luscher, how ‘the artist may set forth even less of the whole picture and rely on the reader’s pattern-making faculties to formulate the variable connections and build textual consistency’.⁹ Luscher, interestingly, cites *The Sketch Book* as a precursor to the genre: ‘Even Irving’s *Sketch Book*, with its fictitious narrator Geoffrey Crayon, illustrates the early impulse to produce something beyond a miscellaneous collection of independent tales’.¹⁰ Treating *The Sketch Book* as more than the sum of its parts, rather than just an unrealised impulse, generates fascinating results because we can interpret Crayon’s drive to establish his narratorial presence as action, even in a ‘still-life’ sketch, breathing new life into the genre. Michelle Sizemore maintains that it is the stasis of the sketch, as compared to the action essential to the story form, which allows Irving to take liberties with chronology and to reconstruct narrative time in *The Sketch Book* as something more than linear, and while the sketches themselves remain static, Crayon’s development as a distinct narrative presence becomes a dynamic story all on its own, and heightens the text’s contrasting of time and desire.¹¹ Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris place emphasis on the way that a composite novel may ‘... eschew linear narration (at least in part) and achieve whole-text coherence through the principle of juxtaposition’.¹² Since the individual sketches were later compiled into one unified collection, it is rewarding to use knowledge of how a composite novel functions to extract significance from Crayon’s development as a narrator. Short-story theory with regard to the novelistic aspects of a composite informs this reading of *The Sketch Book*, as it enables our perception of Geoffrey Crayon as being a homodiegetic narrator with his own arc as opposed to merely a stand-in or pseudonym for Irving, whereupon the very act of having a fictional persona freed Irving from potentially negative criticism of his ideas. Irving’s choice to present his narrative via a fictive author allows what Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky called the ‘filtering persona’ of Geoffrey Crayon to serve ‘as a screen between himself and his audience, shielding him from the hostile response he dreaded’, whereupon even the screen itself further signifies liminality.¹³ Irving’s deployment of Crayon as an idealised form of the ‘American abroad’ stereotype therefore becomes a kind of romantic wish-fulfilment, a transatlantic hokey-pokey, with one foot in and one foot out of both place and time.

Geoffrey Crayon begins ‘The Author’s Account of Himself’ with a mission statement for his quest: to visit new scenes and observe strange characters, to see something of Europe’s ‘charms of storied and poetical association’, and, above all, ‘to see the great men of the earth’ (AAH 3-4). With these goals in mind, Geoffrey Crayon makes the passage to England, but his search for greatness is promptly consumed by his growing concern about the fate of literature and his place in its annals. ‘As it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand, and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches, I am disposed to get up a few for the entertainment of my

⁹ Robert Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* edited by Lohafer and Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989) 155.

¹⁰ Luscher 150.

¹¹ Michelle R. Sizemore, “‘Changing by enchantment:’ Temporal Convergence, Early National Comparisons, and Washington Irving’s Sketchbook”, *Studies in American Fiction* 40.2 (Fall 2013) 168.

¹² Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne, 1995) 103.

¹³ Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, ‘Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch’, *Early American Literature* 21.3 (1986-87) 238, 231.

friends,' writes Geoffrey Crayon (AAH 5). This, he claims, is his intention, but his language betrays him; 'I am disposed to get up a few ...' implies the very-present tense, as though the remainder of his sketches do not immediately follow this one, they have indeed already been written, even as he is only now 'disposed' to do so. While a casual tourist's sketches may be spontaneous and drawn on-location, Crayon's sketches, then, are much more carefully conceived, and may even be composites of several visits to the same location, or even imaginary! Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky writes that *The Sketch Book* 'traded on these common and current associations (of the sketchbook conceit), although there was nothing careless about the writing, construction, or publication of *The Sketch Book*',¹⁴ this observation was specifically made about Irving, but it works even better as a statement about Geoffrey Crayon and his status as a fictive author. Crayon makes no claim to be travelling 'pencil in hand'; even though he tangentially places himself in the category of a casual tourist by claiming to be working 'as it is the fashion for modern tourists,' his employment of 'as' here reads more like a challenge than a conciliation, 'as' genteelly standing in for 'while' or 'although'. Through Crayon's posturing and manipulation, his gnawing need to be popular and well-liked becomes clear, and echoes to a certain extent Irving's own, minus, of course, the nagging pressure of Irving's economic woes – a pastoralised look at the life of the author right from the start.

While 'The Author's Account of Himself' establishes the premise of the collection, which is that Crayon will be our tour guide on a meandering journey across England, the sketch 'The Voyage' builds anticipation for the quest by using the location of the ship across the Atlantic as a reference point for being not quite here nor there. The setting of the sketch, a boat as it crosses the Atlantic from America to England, increases the effect of alienation that Crayon attempts to achieve here and throughout the collection. While Irving, on his 17-year expatriation from the United States, 'may have drifted away from America physically, he never left it psychically';¹⁵ chronologically, Geoffrey Crayon is left to bear the weight of at least four of these years, even on what is purportedly his first voyage. From the very beginning of the book, Crayon's self-imposed exile spurs his expeditions and keeps him isolated from the people around him. His bend towards intellectualism stunts Crayon's perception of his surroundings, and he can only identify with his surroundings or position by redefining it in the context of literature. For example, Crayon compares the act of travel itself, a physical, exterior function, to the intellectual, interior act of reading: 'it seemed as if I had closed one volume of the world and its concerns, and had time for mediation before opening another' (AAH 7). Continuing in this vein, he likens the sea itself to text: 'The vast space of waters, that separates the hemispheres is like a blank page in existence,' writes Crayon, and thus seizes upon it to fill this blank page. Crayon defers to his inexperience by directly giving voice to his ship's captain, who stands in for Crayon and delivers a tragic tale of shipwreck and loss that would otherwise have been beyond Crayon's ken. Geoffrey Crayon sees only what he wants to see, his telescope shuts out everything else:

As we sailed up the Mersey I reconnoitered the shores with a telescope. My eye dwelt with delight on neat cottages with their trim shrubberies and green grass plots. I saw the mouldering ruin of an abbey over run with ivy, and the taper spire of a village church rising from the brow of a neighbouring hill – all were characteristic of England. (AAH 10)

¹⁴ Rubin-Dorsky, *Washington Irving* 230.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, *Adrift in the Old World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 31.

And all this – the very images upon which he dwells throughout the collection whenever London or the rest of England is concerned – he knows even before disembarking. Crayon’s England, like Irving’s, comes from books, and not even seeing it with his own eyes will alter his impression, which was formed in the libraries of his youth. By offering up the captain’s tale, Crayon’s experience remains as seen through his rose-coloured telescope. He dwells on his solitude, barely disguising his desperate need for approval: ‘I had no friend to meet, no cheering to receive’ (AAH 11). One asks whom could Crayon have possibly hoped to be waiting on the other side?

Irving had ‘known from his earliest infancy the names of the city streets and scenes’ of London – but he had of course, like Crayon, learned them all from books.¹⁶ Travel literature was naturally among the most popular reading in Irving’s time, and *The Sketch Book* itself is also a sort of travelogue, although Geoffrey Crayon frequently spends just as much time describing what he doesn’t find in London as what he does. This would have been a subversive enough approach for a travel writer to take, but Irving also deploys his Geoffrey Crayon persona in a rather more risky way, which is to set a clear position for America as having its own distinct identity, as he does in ‘English Writers on America’. The desire to please a transnational audience meant that Irving had to be very careful when he describes the way America had been portrayed so far in English travel literature. It was his uncanny ability to negotiate this exchange that produced ‘English Writers on America,’ which received, in its own time, great praise and recognition, and remains an important example of Irving’s political dexterity and literary diplomacy.

‘English Writers on America’ attempts to define and correct what Crayon refers to as the ‘literary animosity daily growing up between England and America’ (EWA 42). He feels that the English press, rather than disseminating facts about America, goes out of its way to print the ‘gross misrepresentations of coarse and obscene writers’ rather than the truth. He condemns the ‘censors’ of the English press for wasting their ‘opportunities of enquiry and observation and their capacities for judging correctly’ the true nature of the United States (EWA 44). Crayon recognises that the press serves as both a filter and as the prime medium by which people’s opinions are indelibly formed. The ready dissemination of the written word has made the world smaller; there is ‘nothing published in England’ that escapes the American reader, ‘not a calumny dropt from an English pen, nor an unworthy sarcasm uttered by an English statesman, that does not do to blight goodwill and add to the mass of latent resentment’ (EWA 46). Since, after all, ‘everyone knows the all pervading influence of literature at the present day, and how much the opinions and passions of mankind are under its control’ (EWA 45), it is therefore up to the press to sort out the truth from fiction and present to its audience an unbiased account of news and relevant information.

In order to frame and contextualise the debate, Crayon must establish for us what he means by ‘England’ and ‘America,’ which he does by way of describing – in a purely informative way, of course – the prevailing traits of both places. Crayon’s America, as represented in this piece, is made of ‘sound and wholesome ingredients’, a beacon of universally educated but simple people who graciously offer ‘asylum for strangers from every portion of the globe’ (EWA 44, 46-48). Crayon’s England, on the other hand, is a country of ‘smug conveniences and petty comforts which belong to an old, highly finished, and over populous state of society,’ containing people whose ‘absurd expectations produc[e] petulance in disappointment’ (EWA 43-4). His mode of

¹⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, *The World of Washington Irving* (New York: Dutton, 1944) 156-7.

correction, while attempting to ground his narrative in a specific American regionality, thus gives way to the same sort of slander that he abhors in the English press.

For example, it must be noted that, while narrating a corrective piece against those of the London press who 'diffuse error rather than knowledge', he is doing so unabashedly as an American, his allegiance to the New World made plain by his tedious incorporation of the plurality of the editorial 'we,' as opposed to his customary 'I'. Crayon here takes it upon himself to represent, or even personify, 'The American', as opposed to 'An American', a title he can more rightfully claim (and does in 'The Voyage'). Although he references the plural American early in the piece when he notes that 'it has also been the peculiar lot of our country to be visited by the worst kind of English travellers', and proceeds to refer to the English people who have previously written about America, quite pejoratively, as 'they' – as in 'they are capable of judging only of the surface of things; of those matters which come in contact with their private interests and personal gratifications' – it is not until much later, in the sentence 'we attach too much consequence to these attacks', that Crayon makes the all-important switch to 'we' from his original first person point of view (EWA 43-5). Crayon makes this change to what Jahn terms 'collective focalization' as a defence mechanism;¹⁷ once America is on the defensive, Crayon needs the reinforcement of the we-narrative masses. From this point until the end of the narrative, 'I' scarcely graces the page. His technique of first establishing a sense of individual authority, then systematically opposing a given opponent and his ideas, then closing with an inclusive 'we' in the right-meaning place of 'I', thus simultaneously encapsulates both enemy and ally in a deft change of pronoun.

Yet Crayon's use of 'we' is more than a rhetorical device, it is a political choice, and it is also a subtle and perhaps insidious proof of his vulnerability as a narrator. For without the 'we', Crayon would be a mere 'traveller, who publishes an account of some distant, and comparatively unimportant, country' for the entertainment of 'his immediate neighbours': the very sort of bloke whose presence in letters so rallies his frustrations (EWA 43-4). It is only by asserting his place as a part of a whole that his words have any sort of resonance; his appropriation of the 'we' voice gives him the authority he needs to counter the vicious slanders put forth by English writers on America, yet without personally shouldering the burden of opinion. And yet, he does not want to risk alienating his English audience, which is perhaps why Crayon closes 'English Writers on America' by asking Americans to 'place England before us as a perpetual volume of reference ... we may draw from thence golden maxims of practical wisdom, wherewith to strengthen and embellish our national character' (EWA 49).

One of the key oppositions *The Sketch Book* presents is that of New York against London, representing the other, less immediate conflicts that come to define *The Sketch Book*, such as new versus old, or the established versus the frontier. For a 'literary' New Yorker (certainly a juxtaposition of terms in Irving's day) London itself *was* the frontier: it was all well and good for a native New Yorker to write the satirical *History of New York* for a British audience, as Irving did in 1809, but to presume to write on such beloved landmarks such as the Tower of London, the reading room of the British Museum, Westminster Abbey, and even the national caricature of John Bull, for a sophisticated London audience with its own fully-formed notions of these places and ideas, would have been a bold step for an American to take, especially when the very idea of an American writer was so new. Jane Eberwein wrote that *The Sketch Book* represents a

¹⁷ Manfred Jahn, *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (English Department, University of Cologne. 2005) 31. <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm>. Web.

‘working out of Irving’s worries about his prospects and those of his country’;¹⁸ Irving not only worried about his personal reputation as a writer, but about his abilities to represent America as one of its first writers. He was also extremely worried about his financial status, and while, being as he was already well known at home, he wanted to write on themes that ‘would be popular and striking in America’,¹⁹ Irving was also on a sort of quest to make his entrée into London society, hoping to restore his family and personal pride in the process. To this end, he had to be very careful to present versions of home and away that would please both audiences.

The main way, however, in which Irving’s *Sketch Book* managed to win over a cross-Atlantic audience, however, is that it presents versions of *both* countries that play to their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. In order to do this, he focuses Crayon’s narratorial gaze less on London’s grittier aspects, and more on its quaint charms and curiosities, which would have pleased both groups of readers, and the majestic New York he presents in stories like ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ is a rural fantasy almost tailor made for an overworked and jaded city reader, whether he or she dwell in the City or in Gotham (a nickname, incidentally, which Irving himself coined and made famous in 1807). Both the stories about the city or those about the country, however, are presented from a pastoral perspective, as though they are written about places long changed or times long past, but Irving wrote the present of *The Sketch Book* as though it was not just the past, but the idealised past that may or not have been the actual, historical past of the places he sketches. *This* is how the book came to appeal to such a large and divided readership: we all like to have our picture taken in a flattering light, in custom-made clothes that fit well, and by a patient photographer who is not afraid to subtly use Photoshop to smooth out our wrinkles and whiten our teeth; Irving merely gave the people what they wanted, and he was amply rewarded for it.

The pastoral genre itself has evolved over thousands of years, and the definition of ‘pastoral’ has broadened greatly as a result. Once a very rigid form, pastoral has come to broadly represent a fictionalised imitation, or even idealisation, of rural life. This is not to say that tension does not exist within the pastoral; Raymond Williams notes that although pastoral literature celebrates ideal feelings and images, ‘there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience: summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present.’²⁰ As time passed, simple agricultural economies gave way to more complex feudal systems, often leaving individual farmers and shepherds working for an estate rather than for themselves. Pastoral literature inevitably reflected these changes; the peasant labourer no longer had a narrative voice (one could argue that he never actually did), and although the pastoral’s intensity of attention to natural beauty remained strong, this intensity became ‘the nature of observation, of the scientist or tourist, rather than of the working countryman’.²¹

Yet when the ‘real’ shepherd could no longer speak of the simplicity of nature and rural life, artificial shepherds supplanted them; the shepherd-farmer figure became a mask, and the natural environs of this figure a backdrop for disguised courtly and political intrigue. These ‘shepherds’ spoke in courtly language and appeared in costumes less appropriate for the pasture than for the parlour. Before long, the pastoral itself became a metonymical reference point by which the

¹⁸ Jane D. Eberwein, ‘Transatlantic Contrasts in Irving’s *Sketch Book*’, *College Literature* 15 (1988): 154.

¹⁹ Irving, Letters 546.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: Hogarth, 1985) 18.

²¹ Williams 20.

mere intimation of the pastoral is enough to serve the writer's ulterior purpose, whether that be to criticise the court or the church, or to mock courtship rituals, or to more simply reassure the audience that they were on the 'city' side of the stage. Dr Johnson condensed the definition of pastoral to include literature in which 'any action or passion is represented by its effects on a country life'; it is from this definition that later writers working within the pastoral tradition took their cue.²²

That the rural workingman had been replaced by the scientist or the tourist, and that the pastoral mode itself became a literary reference point are the two points of departure for Crayon's comparison of the city and the country in England. Crayon's use of the pastoral takes the political undertones of earlier pastorals to the next level; while Alexander Pope, for example, may have moved the intrigues of the London court to the broad countryside, Crayon's playing field is much larger, spreading across the Atlantic rather than across the counties. Crayon's pastoral is not so much about the relationship of the city and the country as it is about the relationship of the England and the United States, respectively, which is still tenuous, still beginning. The city and the country, as it were, become metaphoric reference points, convenient substitutions for his real subject matter.

Yet, as we observe in 'The Voyage', Crayon writes not about what he sees, but what is already in his mind; he writes the *image* of the two places, not the places themselves. Crayon writes what he believes that his intended audience wants to believe, in order to derive a certain amount of power from his creation of both narrative and audience; he, like his 'father' Irving, seeks praise, belonging, and identity. To achieve this end, Crayon deliberately uses and subverts the conventions of the pastoral tradition to manipulate the expectations of both of his intended audiences. Crayon's outsider status means that he can 'report' on present conditions in England without the appearance of bias, but he simultaneously invokes his self-serving concern to shape things in a flattering fashion, thus creating (or perhaps re-creating) the present at the same time that he narrates it. It is an old tradition, whereas a narrative turns into an anachronism, thus handily finding itself outside of the laws of time.

As always, Crayon sits on two sides of the fence, the fence being this time the moat of the Atlantic. By focusing on a pastoral, rural setting, one in which even suffering is sweet, and no one seems to work for a living, he panders simultaneously to his American audience and his English audience: to the Americans for what could be, and to the English for what once was; to both he presents a reminder of noble heritage. Let us not forget that the two countries were one, and then at war, just 40 years before the publication of *The Sketch Book*. The stories presented in the collection are presumed to be concerned with and having taken place within more or less the same time frame, and the sketches were meant to reflect current events. But with the then-recent development of the United States of America as an entity separate from England, the meaning of 'America', that is, what it is to be an American, was, at the time of Crayon's narrative, still up for grabs. To a newly-minted American, Crayon's emphasis on England's rural, bucolic roots seems strangely comforting, especially when one considers that America was, at the time of the publication of *The Sketch Book*, fresh from the War of 1812, which was considered a success for the Americans not at least because it sealed America's independence as a military presence. This success, however, called into question the continued American dependence on English culture and literature. Crayon's pastoral emphasis is therefore politically subversive: Crayon writes

²² Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* 37 (London: Printed for J. Parsons, 1795). Accessed <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/rambler37.html>. Web.

about England as seen through a soft-focus lens, and in the past tense; Crayon's presentation of an old subject in the new political climate is an act of defiance. To the contemporary English reader, however, the exact same material loses all of its rebelliousness, and the soft glow of its nostalgic and deferential view of England seems strangely flattering. Crayon's encomium seems contrived somehow to serve as an example to those English tourist-writers he so harshly criticised in 'English Writers on America'. As it happens, 'Rural Life in England', the piece which most overtly panders to his English audience, is placed right after 'English Writers in America', in the collection, doubtless to show them how it's done.

Crayon's outsider status (American, independent means, etc.) allows him to emphasise consumption and ritual without labour; he concentrates on the touring man's England, at least when it is advantageous to him to do so. Crayon, although doubtless informed of changes in rural society (e.g. development of industry, or of increased communication and transportation), barely mentions them. In fact, in 'Rural Funerals', he even goes so far as to admire the 'fixed and unchanging features of the country' (RF 122), which might indeed exist in his eye, since he is merely a tourist and wouldn't recognise the changes as they occurred. Nowhere in Crayon's rural England do we find tenant farmers or displaced peasants, which were among several of the harsh realities of England during the time Crayon writes about. In Crayon's bucolic paradise, the farmers are all noble and proud, the peasants' clean and cosy cottages (and they all seem to have them) 'bespeak the influence of taste, flowing down from high sources, and pervading the lowest corners of the public mind' (RLE 53). Yes, it seems that some larger estates have somehow absorbed the smaller ones, thus having 'almost annihilated the sturdy race of small farmers': - Crayon apologises for this in 'Rural Life in England', but these, he believes, 'are but casual breaks in the general system' (RLE 53).

Likewise, Crayon's London (the only city in question) is one in which

the gigantic monster is charmed into repose. ... The shops are shut. The fires of forges and manufactories are extinguished; and the sun, no longer obscured by murky clouds of smoke, pours down a sober yellow radiance into the quiet streets. ('A Sunday in London', 94)

Obviously, people work for a living in London – 'the gigantic monster' simultaneously being the City itself and its spewing industrial machines – but Crayon's observation of London just happens to be on a Sunday, where people trade the factories for the churches and parks. Clearly, Crayon seeks to present both city and country at their sparkling best, denying or whitewashing reality in order to do so.

But rather than directly address the latent animosity between America and England, as he did in 'English Writers on America', Irving, through Crayon, allows the simple opposition of 'city' and 'country' to do the work for him. Sketches like 'A Sunday in London' coexist with sketches like 'The Country Church,' which, set in a village outside of London, simultaneously satirises the pretentious manners and false religion of the village's most prominent residents, yet portrays the rest of the country parishioners as hardworking, modest, and decent citizens: the very image of how an American would like to have been portrayed. It is easy to see how this subtle mode of comparison stands in for a larger national pride; to the typical Englishman of Irving's day, Americans *were* the country cousins, and so in portraying London in a flattering light, but the countryside in a still more flattering light, Irving carefully retains the image of reverence while subtly promoting his own national values.

Furthermore, when New York is represented in *The Sketch Book*, it is done so from the point of view of its still-wild horizon. Nowhere are we presented with New York City's political importance, its overcrowded and dirty streets, or its nearly constant business trading: Irving's New York is the Catskill mountains and the Hudson River valley, headless horsemen and dwarves at nine-pins. Famously, he took 'Old World' adventure stories and transplanted them onto an American landscape using American vernacular, and readers on both sides of the Atlantic absolutely relished Irving's imagination and wicked humour, and were positively entranced by his descriptions of American abundance and good cheer. By taking the old and making it new, he achieved the impossible: New York stories 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'Sleepy Hollow' are so well known as mythology that we tend to forget that they have an author at all.

It is perhaps worth mentioning, by way of conclusion, that *The Sketch Book* was widely applauded by both its English and its American readers; its English readers found 'their world reflected in a mind so accomplished and winning', and the book 'an honour to American letters', while its American readers found *The Sketch Book* to be a 'model of prose' and a 'matter of national congratulation'.²³ In fact, *The Sketch Book* was used as a school primer in the United States for nearly 100 years after a publication, replacing Addison's *Spectator* as a prose model; no less a Londoner than Lord Byron claimed to have known *The Sketch Book* by heart. Clearly, even though Irving risked alienation by presenting a direct criticism of English writers and the London lifestyle, he wrote with such delicacy that his words rang true. On Irving's side, however, are his famous conversational and social skills: Irving was an enormous social success in England, and, as a confirmed bachelor, a sought-after dinner guest and house party participant. After achieving financial success with *The Sketch Book*, but never having married after the loss of his fiancée, Irving was also considered to be a 'good catch', and even *Frankenstein* writer Mary Shelley hoped for more than just casual friendship with him.²⁴ As a result of the immediate and enduring popularity of *The Sketch Book*, he was able to maintain a comfortable and stylish lifestyle, surrounding himself with London's finest painters, actors, and writers. Having learned to negotiate the cross-Atlantic exchange, is it any wonder that this dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker then pursued politics, and became an aide-de-camp to the American legation in London beginning in 1829? He also received an honorary doctorate of civil law from Oxford in 1831. After making such a success of himself in London, beginning with his little sketch book, Irving, in true pastoral tradition and at peace with himself and his reputation, found his way home, dying in his beloved New York in 1859. His quiet influence, however, lives on.

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²³ Brooks 159.

²⁴ Brooks 165.

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